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ABSTRACT

A need for greater consistency in the teacher performance expectations held by teachers, principals, and central office administrators in the Abington Heights School District of Clarks Summit (Pennsylvania) prompted a search for and implementation of a successful staff development program aimed at teacher effectiveness. The program selected was based on learning research conducted at the University of California at Los Angeles and was observed in use in Newport News (Virginia). The version adopted in the Abington Heights district began with a 6-week-long pilot program for administrators, which was positively evaluated by participants. The program was then budgeted as a comprehensive program for the entire professional staff and named "A Program for More Effective Teaching." Trainers and previously trained teachers assist the teachers currently undergoing training through conferences and guided practice. The program emphasized improvement of four instructional skills: the selection of appropriate learning methods for students' abilities, teaching to objectives, monitoring student progress, and adjusting teaching strategies to meet changing conditions. Techniques for preparing to teach, for dealing with students, and for making effective instructional decisions are also covered. The program provides the long-term experience that seems required when new methods are to be adopted successfully. (PGD)

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TEACHERS CAN IMPROVE THEIR INSTRUCTIONAL SKILLS THROUGH STAFF DEVELOPMENT -- ONE DISTRICT'S APPROACH THAT WORKS!

by A. William Vantine, Ed.D.

American Association of School Administrators
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Expanded programs of staff development -- the "in" term in educational circles -- have sprung up in school districts across the nation to meet the needs of various employee groups. Designed to promote staff renewal, combat burn-out, and rejuvenate the work force, sound staff development programs can bring about changes in employee behavior with a resultant benefit for students.

Staff development programs stem from broad based conceptual needs that impact on the school employee's basic work needs. These programs are different from the traditional in-service which is designed to achieve short term goals and objectives and is limited in scope. Traditional in-service programs meet specific needs but often lack the conceptual base and training time needed to make a significant difference in employee behavior over time.

Behavioral scientists contend that changes in adult human behavior occur slowly and result only if the individual recognizes a need to adopt new patterns of behavior. For a person to routinize new patters of behavior, there must be an opportunity for practicing the new behavior and receiving positive reinforcement of the desired behavior. Lack of positive reinforcement and support of a desired behavioral change can result in extinction of the new learning and a return to past behavioral practices. If these notions are applied to staff training, then it is apparent that desired changes in teacher and administrator behavior can occur only if sufficient

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training and reinforcement of new learning is conducted over a period of time.

The need for a staff development plan in Abington Heights School District became apparent three years ago when a teacher association staff survey reviewed evaluation and rating practices in the school district and identified problems of inconsistency in teacher performance expectations. Survey findings revealed that administrative and teacher expectations about sound teaching practices and performance differed among building principals and teachers, and, among administrators at different levels of the management team. It was apparent that a need existed to identify a common set of teacher performance expectancies for both the professional staff and the administration.

To accomplish this end, we turned to educational research on teacher classroom effectiveness conducted by Dr. Madelyn Hunter, principal of the UCLA Lab School, and obtained information from staff development programs based on Dr. Hunter's research. We found that Hunter, and others who had studied the teaching-learning act, had been successful in identifying and isolating specific teacher behaviors that produced measurable learning results.

One of the most successful staff development programs, based on learning research conducted at UCLA, was initiated in Long Beach, California in the early 70's. The program was designed to provide teachers with in-depth training and to help teachers improve their instructional skills. Included were planned input sessions and opportunities to practice what was learned in the classroom under the guidance of a trained instructor. The Long

Beach Program was adopted by Newport News, Virginia in the mid 70's, the first east coast school district to utilize the Long Beach model. Administrators and teachers from the Abington Heights School District visited Newport News during the 1977/78 school year and were so impressed by the potential of the program that a decision was made to send an elementary principal to Newport News for a six week training program.

Staff development personnel in Newport News provided a special indepth, individualized program for the principal and a special debriefing meeting was held for supervisors, administrators, and representatives of the Teachers' Association upon his return to Pennsylvania. Subsequent meetings led to the development of a pilot program for elementary, middle school, and central office administrators (including the superintendent), a subject area supervisor and two teachers selected by the Education Association. Participants in the program attended six full day input sessions over a six week period of time. Each input session was designed to provide participants with specific information about instructional skills with a goal of improving teacher classroom effectiveness. Following each input session, participants made arrangements to practice what they had learned by teaching lessons to district students in a regular classroom situation. All participants were observed by the trainer/principal and all received written reports regarding their ability to demonstrate what was learned in the input sessions.

The pilot program was evaluated by the participants. There was common agreement that the program would be beneficial for the

entire professional staff in that it had the potential of helping teachers and administrators to develop a common vocabulary and set of expectations regarding instructional skills and, in addition, it would help teachers teach more--faster--and become even more effective in the classroom.

The Board of School Directors, informed and consulted through the planning stages, was petitioned by school officials to support the program following an overview presentation in March of 1979. Board approval of a resolution adopting a comprehensive staff development program for all members of the teaching staff on a three year locally funded budget was given in June, 1979, and the program was further refined during that summer. Two classroom teachers were sent to Newport News for training during the summer recess.

Because we firmly believe that we have many effective teachers and that the staff development program would help them do an even more effective job in the classroom, the program was named "A Program for More Effective Teaching." It is the cornerstone of a comprehensive staff development program for teachers and administrators designed to help teachers improve their instructional skills, help students learn more, faster, and help teachers and administrators develop a common vocabulary and set of expectations regarding classroom behaviors that, when practiced, improve instructional skills.

The Program for More Effective Teaching was publicized in Abington Heights schools in the spring of 1979. Faculty meetings were held to explain the program in each elementary school and in

the middle school at the beginning of the 1979/80 academic year. Potential trainers were sought for the initial input sessions and more than 50 teachers volunteered for training. Five sessions were held during that school year and all of the administrative staff and a third of the instructional staff participated in the program.

Other staff members will have the opportunity to participate during the 1980/81 and 1981/82 school years. Five all day input sessions are held on school time over a six week period. Every effort is made to replace the regular classroom teacher with the same substitute during the training period. Approximately 15 to 20 teachers are included in each training cycle. The trainer, who works half time on this program during the school year with part time assistance of a previously trained teacher, observes each participant after each input session and provides the teacher with feedback regarding utilization of the principles learned in the course. A post lesson conference purposely is designed to be a non-threatening experience for the teacher. Also, it affords the teacher an opportunity to discuss the skills learned in the input session and to talk about application of these skills with the instructor who offers constructive suggestions and comments on the lesson. The trainer concentrates on positive reinforcement whenever possible, does not formally evaluate the teacher, and makes every effort to help the teacher grow professionally from the experience. Written records are not kept on the conferences. In fact, the trainer often gives the teacher a copy of his notes of the lesson.

Toward the end of the training period, the principal participates with the trainer in post conferences and actually conducts the final conference with the teacher with the help of the trainer. No records for evaluation are kept of these conferences by the trainer or the principal. The guided practice phase of the program purposely is devised to help teachers improve their instructional skills. It is not designed to "get" weak teachers. Years of experience in education have convinced me that the vast majority of our nation's teachers are interested in doing a good job. Performance expectations and standards of excellence often are non-existent or unclearly defined and understood by those who administer the system or teach in the classroom. Too often, administrators spend a disproportionate amount of their time and effort on conspicuously poor teachers who often are dismissed for reasons other than poor classroom performance. This leaves the rest of the teachers without meaningful direction or feedback regarding their classroom performance. The Program for More Effective Teaching is designed to fill this void and to help encourage teachers--without jeopardizing their livelyhoods--to do an even better job in the classroom.

The Program for More Effective Teaching helps teachers improve their instructional skills by bringing to their conscious level those classroom behaviors that affect student learning. Emphasis is placed on four instructional skills. These skills are selection of the correct learning for students at their level of difficulty, teaching to an objective, monitoring the progress of the students and making necessary adjustments in teaching strategies and

techniques that facilitate student learning, and finally, emphasizing the practical use of learning principles in the classroom.

The program also helps teachers establish an anticipatory set for a lesson, write a task analysis to determine a student's proper instructional level, improve questioning skills in order to effectively challenge students of different abilities, manage covert and overt student behavior by using principles of motivation, reinforcement, retention, and transfer theory effectively, and, use the principle of closure to terminate a lesson effectively.

The Program for More Effective Teaching does not advocate a new method of teaching nor does it restrict or alter a teacher's individual teaching style. It is simply a collection of information from a variety of sources grounded in learning research that concentrates on factors that have an effect on the learning process. It provides classroom teachers with proven methods to make critical decisions concerning the planning and presentation of material to students.

According to research, the best use of a teacher's time is achieved when the following questions are considered:

1. Is the lesson presented in such a way that learning that was planned actually had been accomplished?
2. Is the learning at a level of difficulty that can be achieved by the student? Learning tasks must not be so difficult that they are unattainable or so easy that no effort is needed to complete the learning.

3. Is the teacher checking to see how well the students are learning and adjusting instruction either to move more quickly when students are doing well or to slow down when they are having difficulty?
4. Is the teacher using principles of efficient and effective learning?

The Program for More Effective Teaching does not reinvent the wheel, it simply helps teachers bring some of the proven practices that produce results in the classroom to a conscious level and helps teachers sharpen their skills through a planned program of application of principles of learning with other teachers and their instructor.

As noted earlier, changes in teacher behavior are not likely to occur over time without adequate stimulus and reinforcement. The building principal plays a key role in helping teachers continue to practice what they have learned in the Program for More Effective Teaching. School districts that have adopted staff development programs that do not include building administrators or supervisory staff will find that the retention of program principles diminishes in direct proportion to the absence of continued reinforcement and support by those who administer the system. For this reason, Abington Heights School District has opted to include all supervisors and administrators as participants in the program. In addition, steps have been taken to help administrators improve their clinical supervision skill so that they can assist the teaching staff in strengthening their instructional skills. Special administrative workshops

workshops have been held to help administrators improve their observation, note taking, conferencing, and human relation skills. Building principals have done an outstanding job of helping teachers who have been through the program zero in on instructional needs. Observation reports contain commonly understood terms and both teachers and administrators have been able to concentrate on common performance expectations. Performance expectancies have begun to be included and routinized as part of the regular observation process. This phenomenon has had a positive effect on the teaching staff and benefitted the students they teach.

Experience in this program has led to the identification of higher level staff needs. The conceptual foundation has been laid for an expanded staff development program for teachers and administrators that builds on the foundation of existing programs. The Program for More Effective Teaching is a cornerstone of the comprehensive staff development program for professional personnel but the key to continued success rests with the building administrator and with that administrator's ability to help teachers achieve new plateaus of classroom effectiveness.

A. William Vantine has been Superintendent of the Abington Heights School District since 1972. Abington Heights is a 4000 student suburban K-12 school district in Northeastern Pennsylvania.